

‘Walkabout Tourism’ - Is there an Indigenous tourism market in Outback Australia?

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KEY FINDINGS

This research found:

- In 2011, 24.5% of the Indigenous Australian population resided in Outback areas. Nationally, 7.4% of Indigenous people were away from home on Census night compared to 4.7% for non-Indigenous people.
- Of all people who were away from home in Outback areas, approximately 27% were Indigenous; many of whom were visiting cities or hinterlands.
- The size and composition of the Indigenous tourism market suggests some potential for destinations, or at least, a need for further investigation into how potential might be developed.
- Given the small size of Outback communities, small numbers of sustained jobs from tourism might make a large difference to people's lives.
- There is potential for destinations to engage with and gain from the Indigenous market, such as providing services like an accommodation hub in places where flows are concentrated to attract infrastructure and grants, and address itinerancy issues and homelessness.
- A major part of the 'gains' for Outback destinations is to re-envision Indigenous people on the move, not as a problem, but as potential, focusing on making all tourists feel welcome.

RESEARCH AIM

In light of long term declines in tourism for Outback areas, we analysed baseline data on the movements of Indigenous people to assess whether and why people 'on the move' might be considered as a tourism market.

The study indicates the size and composition of the tourism market by calculating numbers, locations and flows between Outback, hinterland and capital city regions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Outback areas of Australia account for more than 80% of the total landmass but are home to just 5% of the population, many of whom are Indigenous Australians. Despite tourism being an important industry for Outback economies, visitor numbers and expenditure have declined substantially in recent decades (Carson and Taylor, 2009). These declines have prompted national, state, territory and regional tourism organisations to search for and try to attract new and expanding tourism markets. Indigenous tourism, in the form of non-Indigenous visitors travelling to communities, attractions and sites to obtain the Indigenous ‘experience’, has been one market which has been pursued. To date, only limited and isolated accounts of successes (in the form of sustained employment, income for communities, skills development and building community capital) have been documented (Tremblay, 2009).

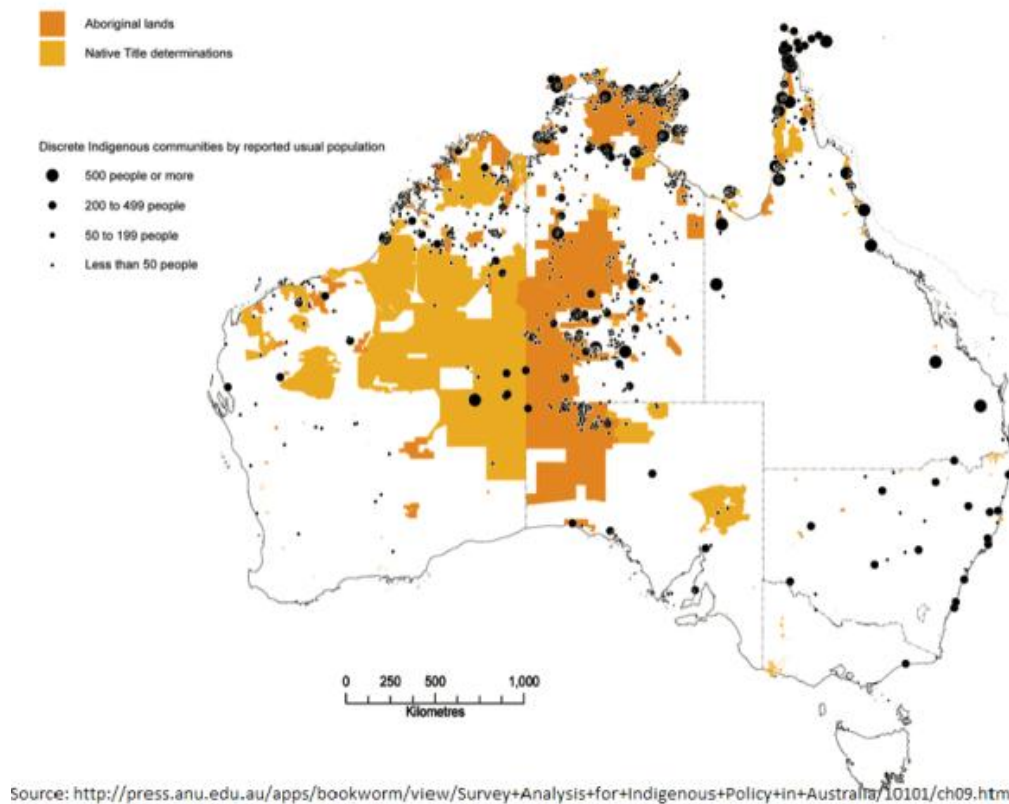
Indigenous people living in Outback Australia are highly mobile, making frequent and regular trips away from home. A lack of understanding on the directions, purpose, length and activities undertaken on trips has permeated through history in Australia and to this day has created friction between residents and those ‘on the move’. This lack of understanding and empathy led to the term ‘walkabout’ being adopted colloquially to denote the seemingly unexplainable and unplanned nature of trips (Petersen, 2004). What has not been considered is the characteristics of these trips posit them firmly within accepted definitions of tourism, which is a stay of at least one night at a distance of at least 30km away from home (Tourism Research Australia, 2014).

With the exception of one related study on longgrassers visiting Darwin (Carson et al., 2013), there has been no research examining Indigenous people ‘on the move’ from the tourism paradigm. Consequently we do not know the potential size or characteristics of the market, an awkward contradiction given the historical focus on generating tourism at places where Indigenous people live. This study is the first to analyse data for Outback areas from the perspective of providing baseline information about that market. We analysed 2011 Census data to plot the size, characteristics and flows of Indigenous people to, from and within the Outback in order to comment on the potential, and to encourage a revision and shift in the discourse around Indigenous mobility towards the positive potential for economic and other contributions.

2. BACKGROUND

The Australian landmass is the size of continental United States (excluding Alaska) with a population of 23 million concentrated in and around large cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane along the eastern coastline, and Perth in the far west. By 2012, some 80% of the nation’s population resided in these urban and peri-urban areas (ABS, 2012a). Away from the eastern coastal strip, the population density falls dramatically to around 1 person per square kilometre. These ‘Outback’ areas constitute more than three quarters of the Australian landmass but are home to less than 5% of residents, most of whom are Indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people). In some areas, up to 90% of the population are Indigenous Australians (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The distribution of Australia's Indigenous peoples.



In recent decades tourism to Outback areas of Australia has declined substantially according to a wide range of indicators. Although a diverse set of transitions have occurred across regions, reductions in the key markets of backpackers, organised coach tours and self-drive markets have featured throughout the Outback (Schmallegger et al., 2011). In tandem with 20% declines in total visitor numbers between 1999 and 2009 (Schmallegger & Carson DB, 2007), record numbers of Australians have travelled overseas each year. With domestic visitors accounting for two-thirds of Outback itineraries, the latter has been a critical issue. Only one or two regions within the Outback have avoided these sorts of declines and, ironically, one of these is Australia's North West which is focused on coastal tourism activities (for example, whale watching). It is also the only region not to have the word 'Outback' in its title (Carson DB & Taylor, 2009).

One market pursued strongly in recent decades for its potential to redress declines in Outback tourism has been the Indigenous tourism market (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2009) which refers to non-Indigenous visits to Indigenous communities, to sites of cultural significance, and to engage with Indigenous people in tours or to view and purchase arts or crafts. However, there are complex and interrelated issues for the supply of Indigenous tourism product, infrastructure and services in Outback areas (Buultjens & Fuller, 2007; Tremblay, 2009 & 2010). Meanwhile significant demand-side has constrained the ability of Outback regions to recover when national tourism conditions improve (Carson DB and Taylor, 2009).

3. ARE MOBILE INDIGNEOUS PEOPLE REALLY TOURISTS?

Knowledge about Indigenous mobility in Outback areas has greatly improved with studies in anthropology, migration and the analysis of the demand and supply for services like housing, health and education. Substantial gaps still remain in relation to understanding the numbers of

people on the move, their sources, destinations, and their characteristics (Taylor, et al., 2011b). Until recently, there has been no research which has considered the cohort of frequently travelling Indigenous people in Outback areas as tourists. In 2013, Carson and colleagues published research (in the *Annals of Tourism Research*) on Indigenous itinerant visitors (or 'long grassers') to Darwin in the Northern Territory. They interviewed around 150 people 'sleeping rough' who had travelled from remote communities to ascertain their source communities, reasons for travel, demographics, length of time in Darwin and frequency of trips. They found that, according to official definitions, around a third could be considered as tourists, around a third were now residents at the destination (Darwin) and around a third were transitioning between these groups. The researchers contested that attempts to manage friction between the tourists and Darwin residents would benefit by perceiving longgrassers as a particular type of tourist: 'problem tourists' who:

'...are incompatible with the accepted dominant status of tourism and emerge from social distance between tourists and hosts, or between different groups of tourists.' (Carson et al., 2013, pg.1)

2. METHODS

The research in this brief builds on previous work of Carson and colleagues (2013) to provide baseline data on the cohort of Indigenous people 'on the move' in Australia, with a focus on Outback areas. We indicate the size and composition of the market by calculating numbers of Indigenous people who were away from home throughout Australia on the night of the Census of Population and Housing in August 2011. We outline the relationships between being on the move and demographic, socio-economic and trip characteristics (travel party, expenditure potential and so on). We then examine the flows of people (by source and destination) as representative of itineraries to discuss the possible net contributions of 'the market' for Outback Australia.

This study is based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics national Census of Population and Housing by comparing two locations - place on Census night compared to place of usual residence. The geographical basis for our study was to compare and contrast the size of the Indigenous cohort on the move in the Outback with the rest of Australia and with non-Indigenous people. Regions were 'constructed' from smaller statistical regions (called Statistical Area Level 3, which represent areas with a population of more than 20,000 and which have a distinct identity and similar social and economic characteristics.) to enable the Outback to be constructed as one region and to facilitate comparisons across geographic levels.

We divided Australia into three geographic regions: Outback areas, Capital Cities and Metropolitan Hinterlands, to analyse the size and direction of movements between the Outback and other areas. The data on flows might be seen as indicative with the value of flows analysis being in proportional comparisons on the size and directions of flows rather than in outlining absolute numbers.

There are limitations with using Census data for the purpose of assessing the size and characteristics of the Indigenous tourist market in Outback Australia. Notably, the Census is a snapshot held on one night and conducted in early August which, in the north of Australia, is the 'dry' season and rivers and creeks are passable such that greater numbers of people are on the move. Balancing this, the Census under-enumerates Indigenous people while others do not declare their Indigenous status, meaning that on balance, the market is likely bigger than the

Census data reveal. In addition, the Census cannot report on trip characteristics such as purpose, length and travel parties. Nevertheless, there is sufficient congruence in the existing literature to extrapolate from the results the potential of the market according the known facets of trips in Outback areas. This study is, therefore, baseline by nature in assessing the size and composition of the market and on that basis provides a platform on which future research activities can be based.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Market size and characteristics

Indigenous people made up 2.7% of the Australian population in 2011 but in Outback areas this was 24.1% (141,289 people). Nationally, 42,500 (7.4%) of Indigenous people were away from home on Census night, compared to 4.7% (875,000) of the Non-Indigenous population (Table 1). In Outback areas, home to 586,000 people in total, a greater proportion of both Indigenous (8%) and non-Indigenous (7%) residents were away from home. Consequently, around 27% (10,700) of all people who were away from home in Outback areas were Indigenous.

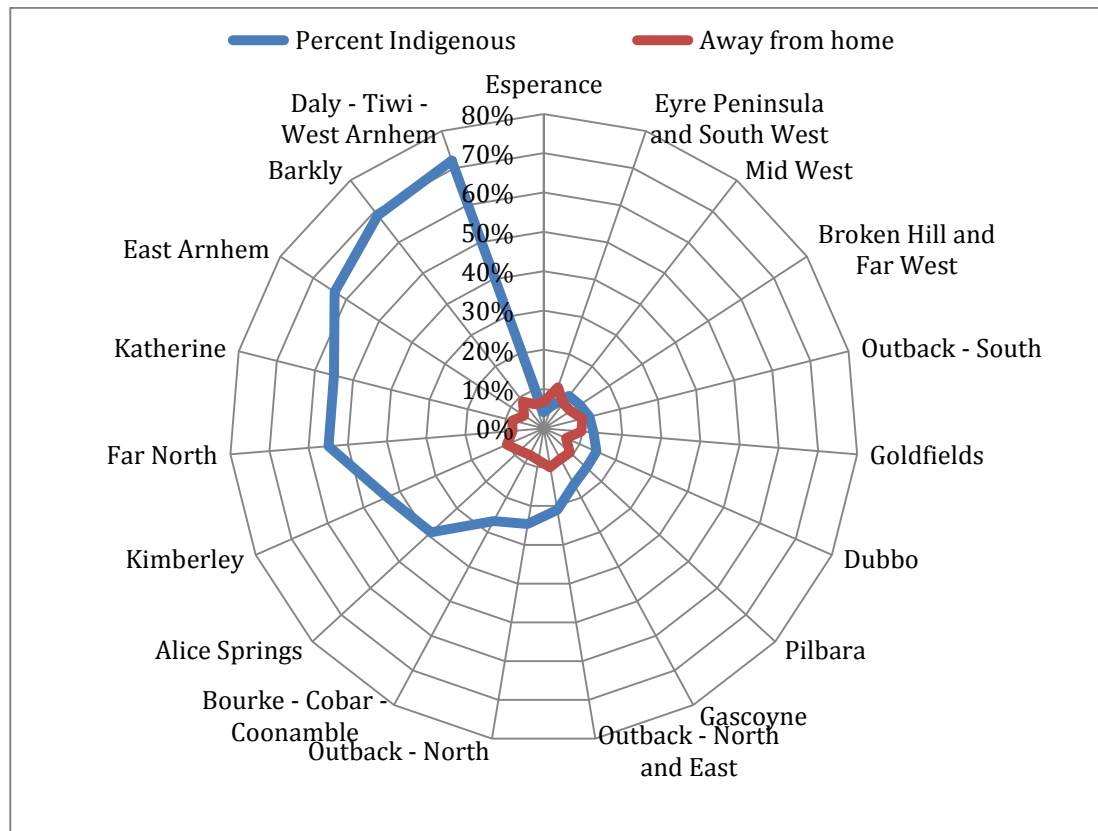
Table 1. Summary of Population and Indicators of People ‘On the move’

Summary indicator	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Total
Proportion of the Australian population	2.7%	97.3%	100.0%
Proportion of the Outback population	24.1%	75.9%	100.0%
Proportion of those living in Outback areas	24.5%	2.1%	2.8%*
Away from home - Outback areas	8.4%	7.4%	7.6%
Away from home - Australia	7.4%	4.7%	4.8%
Proportion of all people away - Outback areas	26.7%	73.3%	100.0%
Proportion of all people away - Australia	4.1%	95.9%	100.0%

*Denotes the proportion of the national population living in outback areas

Despite an over-representation of Indigenous people amongst those on the move in Outback areas, there was no correlation between the proportion of the population at the individual region level which was Indigenous and the proportion on the move (Figure 2). Even in regions with a very high Indigenous representation in the resident population, people were no more likely to be on the move. Indeed three of the top five regions for Indigenous composition (the Far North of Queensland, East Arnhem and Daly-Tiwi-West Arnhem regions in the Northern Territory) had below average proportions of Indigenous people away from home on Census night.

Figure 2: Percentage Indigenous versus Percentage away from home, Outback Regions, 2011.

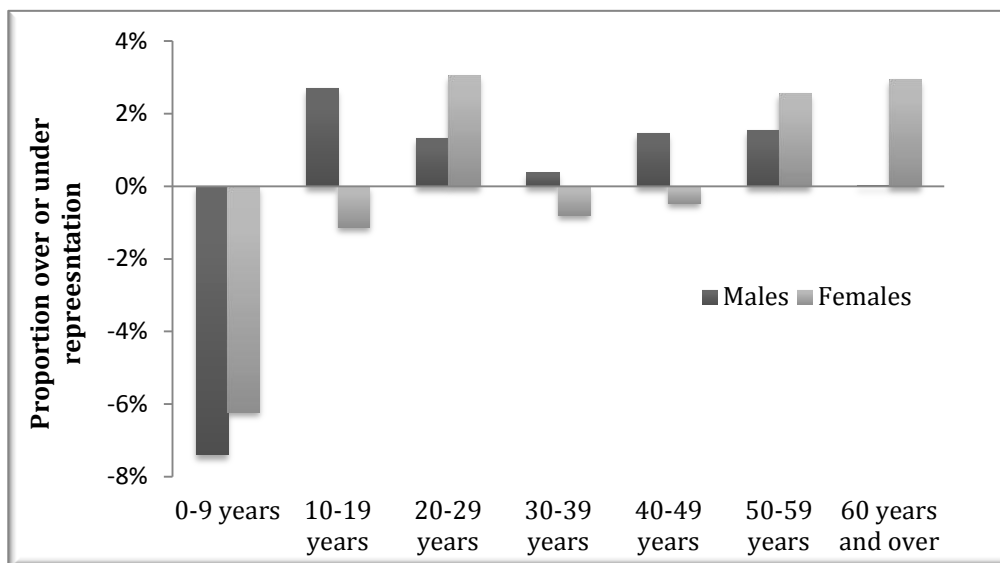


3.2 Age and gender profiles

Those aged 10-19 years and 20-29 years comprised more than 40% of Indigenous people away from home on Census night (23% and 19% respectively). But the age profile of people on the move differed markedly by genders with males skewed towards younger age groups and the female distribution was consistent across all age groups at around 15%. Indeed the direction of correlations for males and females between age and the probability of being away are opposite. Older males were less likely to be away from home while older females were more likely (i.e. there was a negative correlation between being away from home and age for males with $r^2 = -0.78$, but a positive correlation for females at $r^2 = 0.73$)

Standardising by age and gender revealed additional perspectives with females highly on the move at ages 20-29 years and in the older age groups and males at ages 10-19 years (Figure 3). Meanwhile a small share of people less than 9 years of age was away from home on Census night.

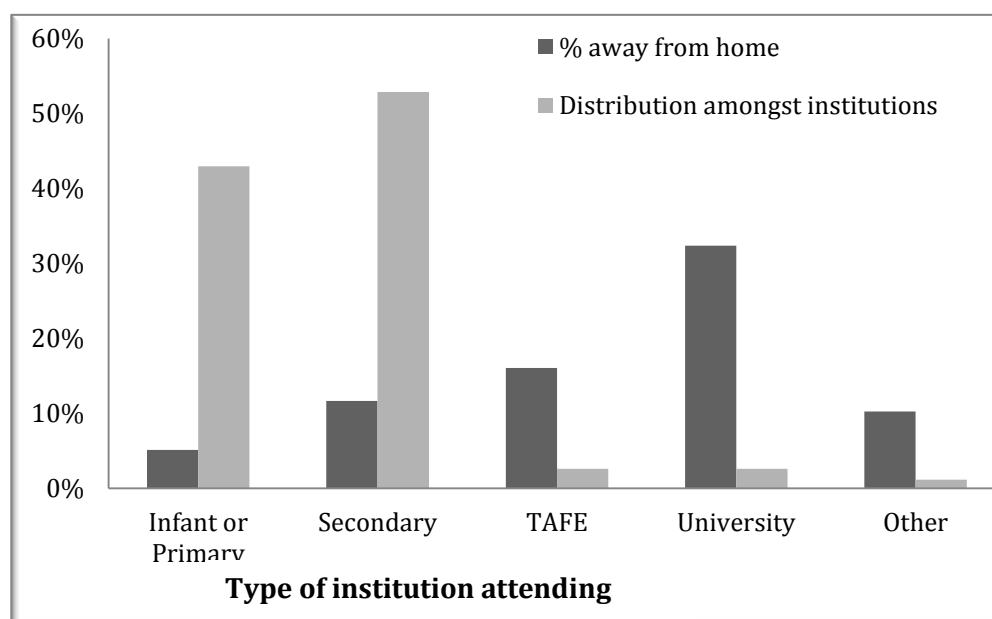
Figure 3: Extent of over or under representation for people on the move by Age and Gender, 2011.



3.3 Other socio economic indicators

Of those attending an educational institution, 9% were away from home on Census night (Figure 4). Profiling by type of institution shows people attending post-school institutions (Tertiary and Further Education, University and Other institutions) were far more likely to be on the move. For example, a third of university attendees were away from home. This is largely expected given there are almost no post-secondary institutions (with hard infrastructure) located at Outback Indigenous communities.

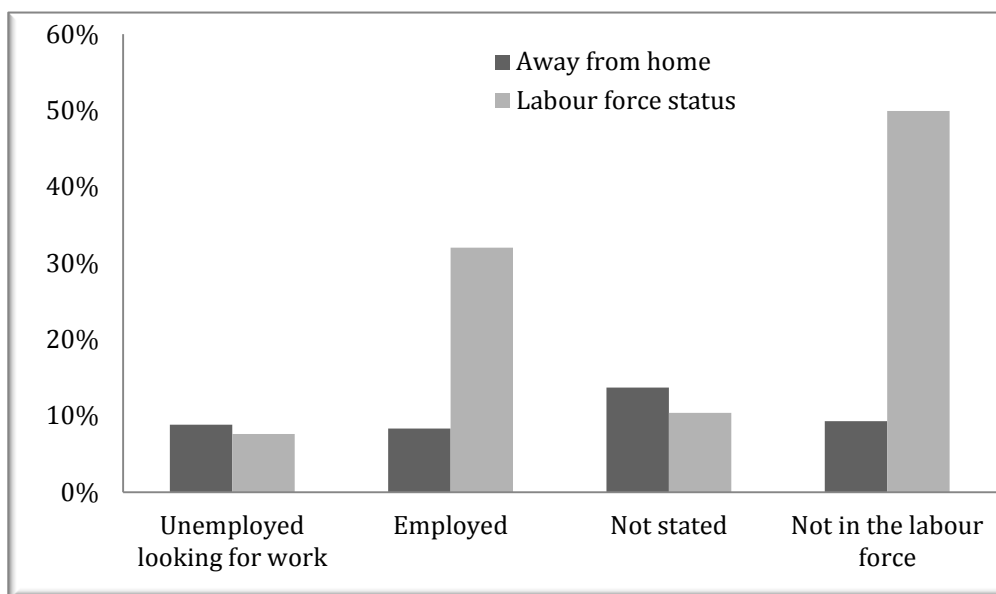
Figure 4: Type of educational institution attending for Indigenous people away from home, 2011.



In terms of partnering status, those never married were most likely to be away from home and were over represented in that cohort when compared to the proportion in the overall population (8% for males and 6% for females). Divorced and separated people were also over-represented, and married people were less likely to be on the move.

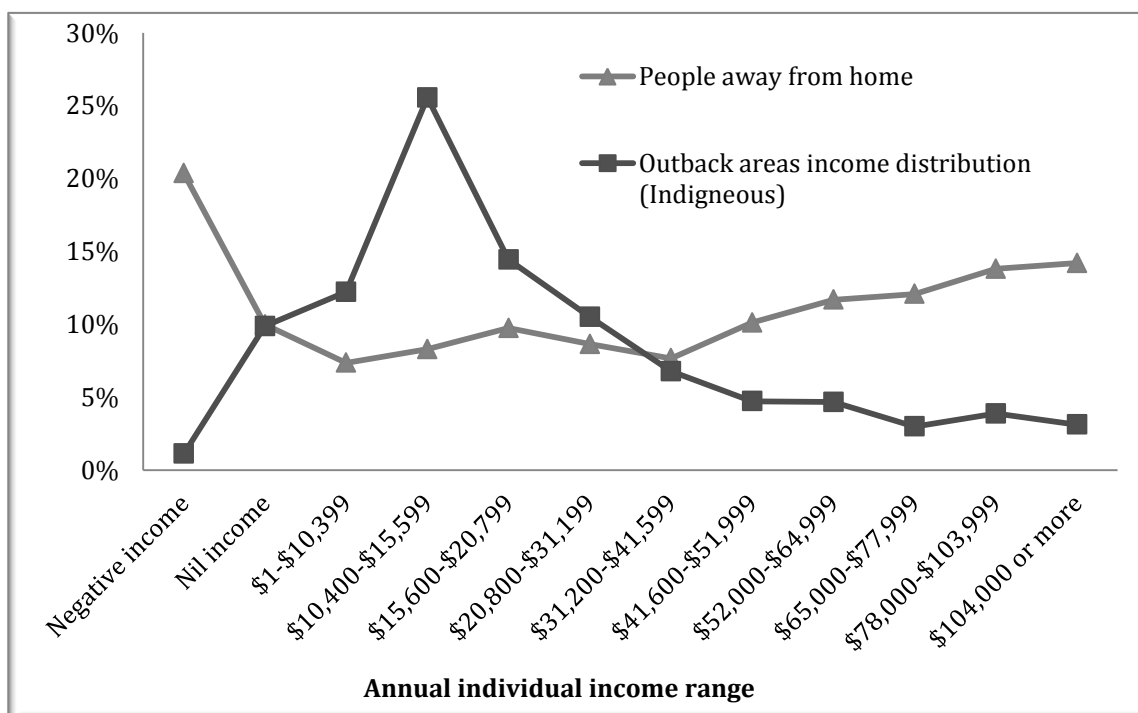
For labour force status, those employed or not in the labour force were highly under-represented in people away, while the unemployed and those who did not state their labour force status were slightly over-represented (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Labour Force Status and being away from home, 2011.



Comparing the distribution of people away from home to incomes shows that most Indigenous people residing in Outback areas had quite low incomes of below \$30,000 per annum. However, a larger proportion of Indigenous people who were away from home were in higher income brackets of above \$30,000 (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Income distribution and proportion away from home, 2011.



3.4 Geographical flows

In 2011, over 95% of people away from home in Outback areas had left the immediate area in which they resided, although more males (4.8% Indigenous and 2.6% non-Indigenous) remained within the same area compared to females (3.5% and 2.1% respectively). Examining movements involving travel to, from or within Outback areas, 44% of people travelled into the Outback (i.e. from Capital Cities or Hinterlands), 40% travelled out (i.e. to Capital Cities or Hinterlands) and 16% travelled within Outback areas.

Movements into the Outback were primarily from geographically proximate Hinterland areas (60%) with 40% from Capital Cities. Interestingly, it was the reverse for movements out of Outback areas where most (57%) were to Capital Cities. Movements into Outback areas from Capital Cities and Hinterlands were highly male biased at 157 males for every 100 females. However, more females than males (a ratio of 97 males per 100 females) travelled out from Outback areas.

5. DISCUSSION

This research has revealed a number of important features about the size and potential of the market of Indigenous people on the move in Outback areas. On the surface, its size appears to be quite small at around 43,000 people in 2011. Clearly, many Indigenous people were not visitors to Outback areas, and instead were visiting cities or hinterlands. Despite this, the numbers in this study represent a snapshot of just one night, and that the annualised size of the market is likely to be substantially greater. Furthermore, the Indigenous population of Australia is growing rapidly and at a pace far greater than the remainder of the population (see Taylor & Bell, 2013). Growth is particularly noticeable in Capital Cities, and, under these circumstances; we can expect the market to grow in line with population growth. Thirdly, in 2011, the Census was shown to have under-enumerated the number of Indigenous people in Australia by 17% compared to 6% for non-Indigenous people (ABS, 2012b). It is generally accepted that rates of under-enumeration are higher in Outback areas (Taylor et al, 2011b) although precise data are not available. These factors mean that the size of the market is substantially greater than the numbers provided in this study.

Although it might be argued on the basis of the low incomes of Indigenous people that economic attribution from 'the market' in Outback destinations simply does not exist, there are mitigating factors to this line of argument. People on the move had relatively higher incomes with older females (likely to have higher incomes because they are the most qualified) over-represented, while the very young (with very low incomes) were under-represented.

Furthermore, Census data does not capture characteristics of length, expenditure and purpose of the trip; however studies in Outback areas have identified commonalities in key trip characteristics by Indigenous people. Invariably these are for combinations of trip purposes including visiting friends and relatives, health and leisure (Carson et al, 2013; Habibis, 2011; Prout & Yap, 2010). Length of trip is consistently denoted as high, and in many cases up to several months of duration (Morphy, 2007). Trips to and around Outback areas are said to be frequent, regular, and high in repeat visitation (Prout, 2008). The latter is in contrast to Outback trips by non-Indigenous people. Therefore, overall trip attributes are positive in terms of market potential.

The flows data provide interesting dichotomies regarding aggregated trip directions, gender configurations and the distribution of trips involving Outback areas. Firstly, almost all people on

the move travelled to areas outside their area of residence. Given units of statistical geography in Outback areas are generally large; this indicates many people were some considerable distance from home. Nevertheless, this finding must be tempered since, within larger Outback population centres, units of measurement are substantially smaller.

Flows data also suggest only a small portion of trips (16%) were within Outback areas with trips to and from Capital Cities and Hinterlands comprising the majority. Furthermore, most trips to Outback areas were from Hinterlands while the majority of trips from the Outback were to Capital Cities. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that some travellers are circulating from Outback areas to Capital Cities, on to Hinterlands and then returning to the Outback. Finally, the reverse gender bias for trips into and out of the Outback (with males dominating trips in, by some margin, and females marginally dominating trips out) indicates Outback areas are 'sending' females to capital cities while 'importing' male tourists from the Hinterlands. Both aspects of the flows data warrant further research at a more fine grained geographic scale.

From a theoretical perspective, the absence of studies on the Indigenous tourist market to date indicates a popularised tendency to view Indigenous people away from home as an anthropological phenomenon. In light of this study, broader conceptual and epistemological narratives are warranted. It is difficult to argue, for example, that women travelling to capital cities might be primarily seeking to fulfil cultural obligations. Examining the issue from a tourism market perspective is one alternative approach, although understanding Indigenous travel patterns from a tourism perspective would require more primary data collection as existing tourist data sets (such as the National Visitor Survey conducted by Tourism Research Australia) do not separately identify Indigenous tourists in the sample.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed the size and composition of the market suggests some potential, or at the very least, a need for further investigation into how potential might be developed. Given the small size of Outback communities, one or two sustainable jobs in tourism might make a large difference to people's lives. On balance, therefore, our study points to the potential for destinations to engage with and make gains from the market. Gains do not have to be direct financial transactions secured from travellers since providing services like an accommodation hub, in places where flows are concentrated, could attract infrastructure and grants, as well as assist in addressing homelessness and itinerancy issues. Consequently, a major part of the 'gains' to be had for destinations, is to re-envision Indigenous people on the move from one of problematisation to one of potential, thereby focusing on making all tourists feel welcome.

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